HENRY STUBBE, radical Protestantism and the early Enlightenment

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Introduction: the historiographical problem

This book is a piece of detective work in more than the usual sense. Not only is it the first book-length treatment devoted to its principal subject, the career and influence of Henry Stubbe; it is also an attempt to solve a puzzle, and this is where the real detective work comes in. Henry Stubbe has received a bad historical press. His career has been divided into two parts by those scholars who have studied him. In the first part, up to 1660, he is quite rightly seen as a republican Independent, a late Interregnum apologist for the 'good old cause' and a spokesman for Sir Henry Vane the Younger.[1] In the second part after the Restoration, however, he has been cast, quite wrongly as it turns out, in the role of a turncoat who rejected the Revolution and became a conservative defender of the established church, the monarchy and Scholastic learning against innovation and particularly against the innovations represented by the new philosophy of the Royal Society and its principal advocates Thomas Sprat and Joseph Glanvill.[2] It is his published attacks on them that have commanded the most scholarly attention, and quite rightly too because they probably constitute the most sustained and vociferous polemical challenge that the Society has ever faced. Stubbe's attacks, moreover, are especially important because they occur at the very moment when the new philosophy and the modern idea of science and its applications were being formulated and institutionalized.[3] This does not mean, however, that, for all the scholarly energy devoted to examining Stubbe's attacks, the issues posed by them have been seen in the proper light because they have not.

Those attacks have been consistently misread partly because Stubbe's career has been divided into two parts, and it is equally true to say that his career has been kept divided by scholars partly because those have been misread. Historians of radical political thought have been interested in Stubbe as a late Interregnum republican theorist and have not ventured beyond 1660 because his explicit republicanism ceases at the Restoration. Historians of science have concentrated on Stubbe's career after 1660, and particularly between 1669 and 1672, because during those four years he mounted his attack on the Royal Society. No one, until now, has explored Stubbe's career with any seriousness after he levelled that attack. True, he

lived only four more years, but his activities during those last years prove crucial, as we shall see, for properly interpreting and integrating his life and thought.

In this study I have considered Stubbe's polemical career from first to last and so have bridged the division between the pre-Restoration radical Stubbe studied by historians of political thought and the post-1660 conservative detractor of all things modern and progressive, especially the Royal Society, the straw man conjured up by historians of science. What emerges is no longer the fractured, bifurcated Stubbe of earlier historiography, but something quite different. The first two chapters treat Stubbe's pre-Restoration thought in greater detail than ever before and expose the close links between his early religious and political views – also something not before attempted, yet extremely important for understanding the continuity between his thinking before and after 1660. During the late Interregnum Stubbe, borrowing principally from John Selden, Thomas Hobbes and James Harrington, developed and advocated a civil religion which would survive the Restoration, undergoing several mutations in the course of the 1660s and 1670s. Stubbe, from the late 1650s to his death in 1676, was committed to a radical civil religion, based upon a vitalistic and materialistic metaphysics, which would have reduced Christian doctrine to a deistical minimum, common to the Jews, the Muslims and the primitive Christians, and undermined the claims of the clergy to separate moral and legal authority, if not in fact eliminating them altogether. This civil religion also entailed a policy of toleration for Protestant Dissenters, regularized poor relief and moderate levelling, and a commitment to a secularizing society in which men would pursue national unity, peace and prosperity for all and turn their backs on conservative and clerical Protestantism.

Stubbe's vision of a new society, bound together by civil religion, derived not only from a vitalistic materialism, but also from a profoundly secular conception of history, particularly Christian history. Man's past, according to Stubbe, is not the product of God's supernatural interventions. This providentialist view of history is just another clerical invention foisted upon men by priests and designed to enhance their authority. History, on the contrary, is the result of its own internal processes. There is nothing beyond history making it turn out as it does. All history is secular history.[4] Thus Stubbe's secular historicism is entirely consistent with his vitalistic metaphysics. There is no spiritual order governed by supernatural forces operating in either nature or history. There are only nature and history, and the spiritual and divine are conflated with the natural and historical. Chapters 3 and 4 of the following account are devoted to showing how Stubbe's view of history and nature survived the Restoration and continued to permeate his thinking.

After 1660 Stubbe was no longer free openly to espouse his radical

political and religious views, his civil religion, given the comparatively strict censorship and the extreme reaction, both in church and parliament, among gentry and clergy alike, to the Interregnum.[5] Thus, during the 1660s and 1670s Stubbe's works, with one bold exception which landed him in jail, were marked by subterfuge and replete with double meanings – another reason that previous readers of Stubbe have been so misled. Stubbe was by no means alone during the Restoration in this resort to deception in order to avoid the censor.[6] Indeed Steven Zwicker has claimed that Restoration polemical literature is generally characterized by 'the language of disguise.'[7] The task has been, therefore, to probe beneath the surface and ferret out Stubbe's Restoration radicalism. The rewards have been well worth the effort. What emerges is the fact that Stubbe remained committed to one version or another of his former, pre-Restoration civil religion. He continued to put forward (albeit by stealth) many of his earlier views – his vitalistic naturalism and his commitment to a primitive, natural religion which provided a historical foundation for his critique of clerical claims to separate spiritual authority, his Erastian tolerationism and his belief in universal charity to the poor and moderate economic levelling. He was no longer explicitly republican but some of his statements are crypto-republican, and were understood by others to be so. Although he embraced the monarchical Restoration, if not the ecclesiastical one, his adherence to monarchy was highly provisional and departed radically from Restoration orthodoxy. He rejected justifications for monarchy resting upon arguments from divine right and even suggested that subjects have the right to resist their king in certain circumstances. He would also deploy his civil religion for the reform of monarchy by calling for toleration, a reduction of clerical power and a dedication to the secular goals of increasing England's wealth and power to the exclusion of the goals of the clerical Reformation. There is evidence to suggest that he subscribed to the notion of mixed monarchy which was officially proscribed after 1660.

Having shown that Stubbe's radicalism survived the Restoration (albeit in new forms), it is possible in chapter 5 to reinterpret his attacks on the Royal Society and to show that far from representing a conservative reaction to the new philosophy, as the standard interpretation would have it, those attacks represent yet another deployment of his civil religion, this time against the alliance being forged during the early Restoration between the Royal Society and latitudinarian Anglican Christianity. The latitudinarian churchmen in the Royal Society constructed a natural philosophy that demonstrated the existence and providence of a supernatural God and the immortality of the human soul. To latitudinarian Fellows of the Royal Society like Robert Boyle, John Wilkins, Sprat, Glanvill and others these doctrines, proved by science and inculcated by the clergy, would establish the church on proper foundations and preserve it from its

enemies. Science was thus seen by the latitudinarians to be crucial to the survival of the church. Nor did they envisage a bare survival. Rather they argued that scientific inquiry was a principal key to increasing trade and profit, domestic peace and imperial expansion, all of which would advance the church's interests and help bring in the Reformation.[8] Stubbe was the first to point out the character of this alliance between latitudinarian churchmen and the Royal Society, or at least its leading publicists – and with good reason. The alliance flew in the face of the objectives of his civil religion which was meant to tear down a clerically dominated society and clerically dominated learning and replace them with something much more secular and pagan. Thus the debate between Stubbe and the polemicists for the Royal Society was not a confrontation between a reactionary Scholastic holdout and the forward-looking Royal Society, that is between error and the advancement of learning, as it has always been claimed to be. It comes down instead to a conflict between two views of how to achieve progress and reform. The Royal Society would attach science to the Restoration settlement in church and state and achieve progress through a steady increase in knowledge of the natural world.[9] Stubbe, on the other hand, would link scientific inquiry and the accumulation of knowledge to the progressive secularization and de-Christianization of society. His was a program for the radical reform of knowledge *and* society; theirs, for the reform of knowledge alone. His vision was one which distressed leading natural philosophers in the Royal Society and which they set out specifically to answer. Nor did the confrontation die with Stubbe. It was the dialogue that would last well into the eighteenth century because views very like Stubbe's were taken up by John Toland after the Revolution of 1688–9 and much later by Joseph Priestley.[10]

The artificial division of Stubbe's career at 1660 which gives the earlier part to historians of republican theory and the later to historians of science is clearly responsible for the consistent misreading of the message underlying his attack on the Royal Society. But there were other reasons for this misreading, reasons from which scholarship has only recently recovered. The study of the history of thought in the seventeenth century was until quite recently bedevilled by an admiration for the achievements of the great natural philosophers of the age. It blinded historians both to the larger social and cultural forces that nurtured natural philosophy and, what is more important in terms of this study, to other forms of intellectual novelty as impressive in their own way as those of mathematical physics. Thus what was opposed to the new philosophy was seen to be backward and all that was in line with it, progressive. Because Stubbe couched his criticism of the Royal Society in terms of an assertion of the values of Aristotelianism, that convenient bugbear of science and progress, it was easy to slip into interpreting his debate with the Society as a clear case of a

conflict between darkness and light, stubborn ignorance and the search for truth.

What was lacking in this quick assessment was any careful evaluation of the terms of the debate, the rhetoric of the argument and the Restoration context in which it took place. When these factors are taken into account, two things become readily apparent. First as to rhetoric, Stubbe, in vaunting the claims of Aristotle and the ancients over the moderns represented by the Royal Society, was appealing to the past not because he was a conservative, but because the past to which he appealed constituted a source of primitive purity and prudence against which to set, measure and reform the corruptions of the present. We have learned from the works of Christopher Hill, John Pocock and others that this appeal to the past was not necessarily conservative and could in fact be a device whose consequences were sometimes extraordinarily radical. In this regard, as we shall see, Stubbe's appeal to ancient authority in his attacks on the Royal Society was the equivalent of the contemporary appeal to the ancient constitution as a corrective to 'the Norman yoke.'[11] More specifically, as we shall also see, Stubbe's championing of Aristotle over Epicurus and the corpuscular philosophy of the Royal Society was close, once his message is decoded, to the contrast set up by his contemporary Harrington between ancient and modern prudence.[12] Indeed it will be argued in chapter 6 that at times Stubbe's views represent a cryptic Restoration revival of Harringtonian vocabulary, distanced though they are from Harrington's meaning.[13]

Second, when the context of the debate between Stubbe, Glanvill and Sprat is taken account of, it becomes clear that the issues were a great deal more complex than a simple confrontation between outmoded Scholasticism and progressive science. This context will be explored in detail in chapter 5.

This complete reversal of our understanding of Stubbe's career after 1660 and his attacks on the Royal Society in particular is confirmed by the findings presented in chapters 6 and 7, which deal with Stubbe's activities from 1672 to his death four years later. As court propagandist in 1672, he rings yet another change on his perennial civil religion, and in the course of defending the third Anglo-Dutch War adopts a position which makes use of Harrington's vocabulary but which departs drastically from his meaning. Stubbe's position again calls fundamental Christian doctrines into question and points towards an at least partial return to the civil religion of early Christianity. The year 1673 is a particularly revealing one in Stubbe's career, and the tracing of his politics during that year constitutes the main subject of chapter 7. Stubbe leaves the court, joins the opposition and becomes a spokesman for some of the more extreme elements, probably including the first Earl of Shaftesbury, in the country party which was just then emerging. The standard interpretation which sees Stubbe as a

turncoat upholder of the status quo would have no way of taking Stubbe's politics during 1673 into account, and in fact has uniformly and totally ignored this stage in his career. It could hardly be claimed that Stubbe was simply doing the expedient thing, as it is claimed he had done in 1660, by joining the opposition in 1673. Seen in the context of his continued commitment to radical ideals throughout the Restoration, however, his migration from court to country with Shaftesbury that year becomes another step by which he hopes to achieve the goals of his civil religion and a reformed monarchy.

Stubbe died in 1676 but his ideas lived on, and the tracing of this posthumous influence is the subject of chapter 8. What emerges is not only that there is a continuity between Stubbe's thinking before and after the Restoration, but that there is a longer continuity linking Stubbe's Interregnum and Restoration radicalism with that of the radical free-thinkers Charles Blount and John Toland before and after the Revolution of 1688–9, a linkage continuing well into at least the second decade of the eighteenth century and probably beyond. Stubbe can now be added to the list of those men like Milton, Andrew Marvell, Henry Neville, John Wildman and Algernon Sidney who nurtured the radical ideals growing out of the 1640s and 1650s and continued, often by resort to subterfuge, to preach a message subversive of Restoration orthodoxy, men whose ideas were later taken up by the early Enlightenment in England. In fact Stubbe's career and later influence provide the best example up to now of precisely how that Interregnum radicalism survived the repression of the Restoration from one year and decade to the next, to be reborn briefly during the Exclusion crisis and more permanently during the 1690s and first two decades of the next century. Other scholars have addressed this question of the survival and mutation of radical ideas after 1660, and what follows is much indebted to this valuable body of work.[14] If this study contributes something to answering the same question, it is because the evidence for Stubbe's career, read in the proper light, tells in the clearest, most concrete way so far the story of this survival and adaptation in the hard and rocky soil of the Restoration. It is this historical specificity that seems so precious and important.

This study also contributes to the story of the continuity of seventeenth-century radicalism in another important way. In the last decade or so it has been shown that the natural philosophy of the Royal Society, as it evolved from Boyle to Newton, was shaped in part in the crucible of the English Revolution, understood as a social and political transformation stretching from the 1640s to the early eighteenth century.[15] This latitudinarian natural philosophy was designed in particular to preserve and enhance Anglicanism by answering the various radical political and religious threats to Anglican hegemony thrown up by the Revolution. The process by which